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AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF MATT. 11:25-30

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The interpretation of this great passage—in some respects the central utterance of the gospels—is beset with a host of problems, only a few of which can even be touched upon in a short article. It would be too much to say that these problems are now in process of solution; but in the case of no New Testament passage have the careful methods of modern investigation more abundantly justified themselves than in this. The verses, which seemed to stand isolated in the synoptic tradition and were therefore discarded by many critics as a Johannine interpolation, can now be related to the teaching of Jesus as a whole. They can be employed, with a degree of confidence which was formerly impossible in the consideration of vital questions affecting his inner life and his messianic claim.

Among the more notable of recent discussions of the passage are those of Harnack (*Sprüche und Reden Jesu*, pp. 189-216), Wellhausen (*Evangelium Matthaei, in loc.*), J. Weiss (Comm. on Matthew in *Die Schriften des Neuen Testaments*), Loisy (*Synoptiques*), Holtzmann (*Synoptiker*), Schmiedel (*Das vierte Evangelium*, pp. 48-51), Klostermann (*Matthäus*). These distinguished scholars are frequently at variance with one another on questions of detail; but the broad results at which they arrive are remarkably similar. It is now possible to speak of a modern interpretation which represents something more than the irresponsible guesswork of one or two critics.

The passage appears at first sight to consist of three parts, thrown together in a merely casual sequence. Jesus thanks his Father that the unlearned have understood his message (vss. 25, 26); he expresses his sense of a filial relation to God (vs. 27); he invites the heavy laden to accept his yoke (vss. 28-30). The three sayings have sometimes been explained as separate logia; and some color is given to this theory by the Lukan parallel (Luke 10:21, 22) which omits

the third saying altogether. Luke, however, is evidently anxious to connect the passage with the incident of the return of the disciples. The third saying would have been quite out of place in this context, and the evangelist may have purposely omitted it, intending, perhaps, to weave it into his narrative at some later stage. There is no valid reason for breaking up the passage as it stands in Matthew, for on closer examination a real unity of thought can be traced in its three sections. Jesus thanks the Father that the simple multitude, which knows not the Law, can receive his revelation. He rejoices to think that this revelation, intelligible to all, is also the fullest and deepest. He closes with his tender invitation to the common people, bidding them throw off the yoke which they have found so grievous and learn the true will of God from the kindest of teachers.

The three divisions of the passage, therefore, are closely connected, and the connection only becomes the more apparent as we study them in detail. But it will be convenient to take them separately, while bearing in mind that they form a harmonious whole. Each of them has its own peculiar difficulties, which require to be considered by themselves.

I. The general meaning of vss. 25, 26 is sufficiently clear. Jesus recognizes, with gladness and thankfulness, that although the "wise and prudent" have rejected him, he has found a welcome among the simple-hearted. In this issue of his work he discerns the fatherly will of God. The chief difficulty in the verses is concerned with the indefinite reference to "babes" (*νήπιοι*). According to Luke's reading of the passage, the simple ones who had understood the gospel were the disciples; but this explanation is almost certainly too narrow. Jesus has spoken of the "wise and prudent"—the arrogant doctors of the Law; and the "babes" whom he contrasts with them can be no other than the unlearned multitude. This contrast, as we shall see, is explicitly set forth in vss. 28-30.

II. It is in the second section of the passage that the main problems confront us. Jesus seems to pass abruptly from the thought of men's attitude toward him, and to assert his sense of a unique dignity. All power has been committed to him, and he is conscious of a union with God in which the Father and the Son are all-sufficient to one another. This doctrinal interpretation of the verse was never ques-

tioned until recent years; but there are strong arguments for putting it aside and replacing it by one which is more in harmony with the passage as a whole, and with the uniform Synoptic teaching.

a) The reference in "all things are delivered unto me" is not to cosmical power but to religious knowledge and insight. In the previous utterance Jesus has spoken of the rabbinical teachers, whose claim to wisdom was based on their conversance with the *παράδοσις*, or religious "tradition." He emphasizes the difference between himself and them by using their technical term in a new application. His "tradition" has come to him from his Father (*παρεδόθη*). He is no transmitter of doubtful knowledge handed down from teacher to teacher, but has received his message from God himself, with whom he is in direct communion, as a Son with his Father.

b) It is more than probable that at least two important changes must be made in the existing text. Irenaeus states that in certain versions of the gospel "hath known" (*ἔγνω*) took the place of "knoweth"; and denounces this substitution as the work of heretics. But the early patristic quotations of the verse seem all to assume the past tense instead of the present. We may reasonably infer that in the original saying Jesus did not allude to a timeless knowledge, inherent in him now as from all eternity, but simply contrasted himself with previous teachers. The "tradition," even at its fountain-head, had represented an inferior revelation; and now for the first time God was truly known. Again, in ancient quotations and manuscripts alike, the first clause ("no man knoweth the Son but the Father") is frequently placed second, in a sort of awkward parenthesis. This uncertainty about its position in the verse is itself suspicious; and there are fair grounds for regarding it as an interpolation. A tendency may well have been at work, from an early time, to assimilate the verse to the Johannine type of doctrine. When "knoweth" was once substituted for "hath known," it was only natural to bring out the theological implication by the addition of the new clause.

c) The parallel verse in Luke reads "knoweth who the Father is" instead of "knoweth the Father." This Lukan phrase is less in keeping with the ordinary language of later Christian thought, and is therefore more likely to be authentic. Jesus would thus imply,

not that he had attained to knowledge of God in some mystical or theological sense, but that he understood the moral character of God. He had discerned, as no one else had done, that God was not an exacting taskmaster, jealous of his Law, but a Father, whom men could obey willingly and gladly. This knowledge had come to him in virtue of his own sonship. He was conscious that he stood to God in an altogether unique relation, which enabled him at once to understand God's will and to interpret it to others.

III. The invitation in the closing verses is addressed not, as commonly understood, to the sinful and sorrowing, but to the common people of whom Jesus has spoken above. He alludes elsewhere (Matt. 23:4) to the "burdens grievous to be borne" which the official teachers laid upon men's shoulders; and in the present passage the reference is undoubtedly the same. The people looked to their appointed leaders for a rule of living and a religious enlightenment in which they might find rest. All that they received was the "yoke" of a meaningless ritual. A routine of ordinances was imposed on them which crushed all the joy and spontaneity out of life and made any true communion with God impossible. In exchange for this "yoke," which neither their fathers nor they had been able to bear (Acts 15:10), Jesus offers them his own, i. e., the new rule of obedience which he laid on his disciples. He tells them that in three ways his "yoke" is different from that which had hitherto oppressed them: (1) They will be instructed by one who is willing to bear with them patiently and teach them. "I am meek and lowly of heart," i. e., gentle and condescending. Jesus here contrasts himself with the Pharisaic teachers who despised the common people and held them at a distance. He is himself one in heart with the humble, and they can "learn of him" without fear of a repulse. (2) They will gain from his instruction what they have been vainly seeking. Their desire has been for "rest"—rest of spirit in the certainty of God's love and providence. This will be given them only when they have learned "who the Father is." (3) They will find the new "yoke" easy to be borne. It does not consist in burdensome ordinances and restrictions, but in willing obedience to the Father, whom it is a joy to serve.

These closing verses of the passage present a series of striking coincidences with the prayer which concludes the book of Ecclesi-

asticus (cf. esp. Ecclus. 51:23–27). From this it has been inferred by some scholars that words not literally spoken by Jesus have been attributed to him by the piety of the early church. But the coincidences, when carefully examined, appear to be little more than verbal. Their existence may be purely a matter of accident; or, if this is regarded as doubtful, we may fairly assume that Jesus was himself acquainted with Ecclesiasticus and that certain of its phrases came back to him, perhaps unconsciously. In any case there is no valid reason for calling in question the full authenticity of the saying. Not only does it bear the unmistakable impress of a word of Jesus, but it forms an integral part of the whole passage in which it stands. The very difficulties that beset the passage are evidence that it comes down from the primitive tradition, and enshrines one of the most certain as well as one of the most precious of the sayings of our Lord.